

# Army's History of Spying On African Americans

Jack Colhoun

**T**he *Commercial Appeal* of Memphis, Tennessee, knew Stephen Tompkins had a big story, so it timed publication to maximize its impact. Two weeks before the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the paper ran Tompkins's investigative report across the front page of its March 21, 1993, Sunday edition. The banner headline read: "Army feared King, secretly watched him; Spying on blacks started 75 years ago."

Tompkins revealed that U.S. Army Intelligence agents had been monitoring King on April 4, 1968, the day the civil rights leader was killed in Memphis. Tompkins detailed how Army Intelligence operatives teamed up with the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama to spy on King and other black leaders such as Stokely Carmichael (now known as Kwame Toure) and H. Rap Brown. The Army provided KKK members with paramilitary training, and Klansmen supplied Army Intelligence operatives with information about local civil rights activists. U-2 spy planes were also used to monitor the civil rights movement.

## Big Exposé Gets Minimal Coverage

Tompkins's story, the result of a 16-month investigation and more than 200 interviews, is one of the best and most explosive exposés of recent years. But readers of the national news media would never know it if they depended solely on the major media's coverage.

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* gave the *Commercial Appeal*'s investigative report minimal coverage and softened its impact, the way the power media often do when a non-élite news organization breaks a big story with the potential of exposing government politics in Washington.

The *Washington Post* (March 21, p. A16) and the city edition of the *New York Times* (March 22, p. A15) each ran a brief Associated Press summary of the story. But the summaries had little punch.

The *Post*'s AP dispatch did, however, feature retired Army Maj. Gen. William Yarborough's explanation for the illegal spy operation. "The Army was over a barrel," declared the head of Army Intelligence in the 1960s. "Blacks were using the uncertainty of the Vietnam period and taking advantage of it. You

couldn't expect people to be rational and look at this in a cool way. We were trying to fight a war at the same time where the home base was being eroded."

The AP dispatch also minimized troubling questions raised by the presence in Memphis of Army Green Berets, detailed to spy on King, the day King was killed. "James Earl Ray pleaded guilty to the assassination and is serving 99 years," AP reassured readers—without pointing out that Ray unsuccessfully attempted to withdraw his plea the day after he entered it. "The *Commercial Appeal* said its investigation found no evidence of Army involvement in King's death."

## Army's Spying Enrages Black Neighborhoods

The *Commercial Appeal* story touched off a storm of anger in African-American neighborhoods in the District of Columbia, which is about 70 percent black. I learned about it while waiting to appear as a guest on Larry Hicks's talk show on black-owned WOL-AM radio station on March 23. I had been invited to WOL to discuss my investigation of the ways in which cocaine and heroin money-laundering by the Bank of Credit

and Commerce International (BCCI) and other banks in the United States fuels the deadly turf wars among drug gangs in D.C. and other cities.

But the previous segment in which Hicks discussed the Tompkins report ran over into the next time slot. I didn't mind. I got a first-hand opportunity to experience the intensity with which African Americans reacted to the Army spying story and the élite media's lack of interest in it. Listeners were outraged when they learned about the details left out of the AP summary the *Washington Post* published.

Callers dismissed the Army's rationale for spying on blacks as racist claptrap. Army intelligence officers had considered African Americans "ripe for subversion" by the German Kaiser in World War I when the Army began in 1917 to monitor black preachers and other leaders.

## King Designated a National Security Threat

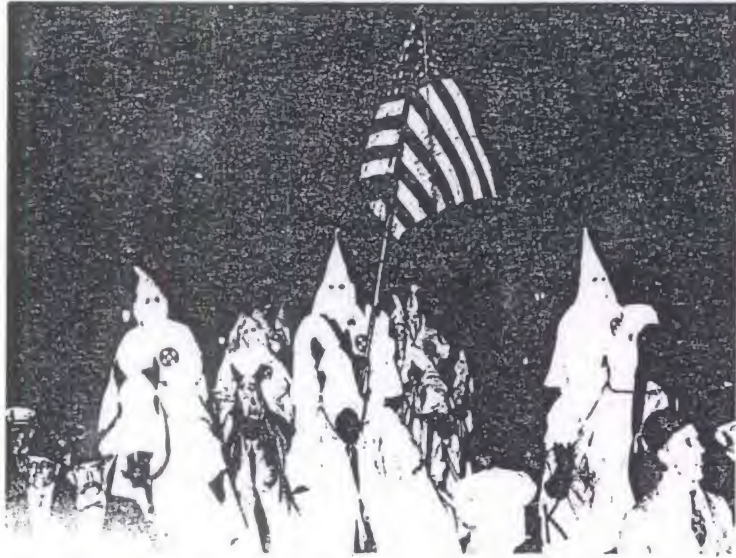
When King started to link civil rights issues to opposition to the Vietnam War in 1967 and 1968, the Army designated him a major national security threat. A 1967 Intelligence document cited by Tompkins asserted King "repeatedly has preached the message of Hanoi and Peking." Army Intelligence believed King and others were bankrolled by China and the Soviet Union to speak out against the war.

But King's message was prescient. "A few years ago, it seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the poverty program," King declared over and over in speeches. "And then came the buildup in Vietnam ... and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor.... Somehow this madness must cease."

Callers to WOL were furious that the *Washington Post* did not use its resources and political influence to put the subject of Army spying on African Americans high up on the agenda in the

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AP / Wide World Photos



The Klan's been riding as long as the Army's been spying. Here, a 1923 march in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

nation's capital. They wanted to know why the *Post*, with its famous investigative reporting team led by Bob Woodward, had left it to a newspaper in a mid-sized city like Memphis to break such an important story.

WOL kept the story alive for a week. *News Dimensions*, a black weekly newspaper in D.C., published a special edition

March 26, reprinting the *Commercial Appeal* report in an effort "to thwart [the] local White media cover-up."

WOL distributed 10,000 copies of the special issue in two days. Dick Gregory appeared on WOL to discuss the implications of the *Commercial Appeal* exposé with regard to the King assassination. Two hundred copies of Gregory's and Mark Lane's *Murder in Memphis: The FBI and the Assassination of Martin Luther King* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1993) were sold in two hours.

The *Washington Post* played catch-up with a March 23 editorial. The editorial said that if the *Commercial Appeal*'s report were accurate, "that piece of ugly history ... can't be allowed to remain in silence.... The need for full public disclosure of all the facts is strong." The editorial noted an Army investigation into the matter would be completed soon. But neither the Army nor the *Washington Post* has revisited the subject yet.

### Green Berets Worked with KKK

Tompkins revealed how Special Forces personnel, recently returned from Vietnam, were assigned to monitor King's activities in the South. Green Berets attached to the 20th Special Forces Group, headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama, were directed to gather intelligence on the civil rights movement.

They formed an alliance with the "Klan guys who hated niggers," a former Green Beret told the *Commercial Appeal*. "So

## Special Forces in Vietnam: Spies and Assassins

**W**hat made the Special Forces veterans, redeployed from Vietnam to the deep South to spy on Martin Luther King, Jr., and others black leaders, "crazy"? In South Vietnam, they had waged political terror against civilian "targets" as spies and assassins in the CIA's infamous Phoenix Program.

What made Phoenix so nefarious was its cold-blooded brutality. Tens of thousands of innocent civilians were killed and more than 200,000 jailed as the result of Phoenix's shot-gun assault on National Liberation Front (NLF) cadre.

Douglas Valentine described Phoenix "neutralizations" in *The Phoenix Program*. Some suspected NLF cadre were assassinated "sleeping in bed." Others were "brutally murdered along with their families or neighbors as a means of terrorizing the neighboring population into a state of submission" (p. 13).

Special Forces personnel led "hunter-killer" teams, which sometimes swept into villages in South Vietnam from CIA-supplied helicopters. All civilians were rounded up and questioned. Those identified as "Viet Cong infrastructure" (VCI) were taken away for further interrogation and torture to be killed if they weren't pushed out of helicopters on the way to

Provincial Interrogation Centers.

Phoenix identifications of suspected NLF cadre were notoriously inaccurate. "I had no way of establishing ... the basis on which my [Vietnamese] agents reported to me suspected VCI," asserted Bart Osborne, who served on the 525th Military Intelligence Group in Vietnam. "There was no cross-check, there was no investigation; there was no second opinion" (p. 382).

Special Forces operatives relied on the criminal class of South Vietnam to gather intelligence and carry out hits as members of Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs). Former Navy SEAL Mike Beamon recalled his PRU was "made up by and large by guys who were doing jail time for murder, rape, theft, assault in Vietnam. The CIA would bail them out of jail under the condition that they would work in these mercenary units" (p. 170).

The Special Forces in the Phoenix Program were a law unto themselves and often got out of control. Detachment B-57 was terminated in 1969 after seven Green Berets were charged with murdering one of their Vietnamese agents.

—Jack Colhoun



The U.S. Army decided that Martin Luther King, Jr., was a threat to national security. Here he is threatening Chicago civil rights leader Al Raby in 1966.

we'd ask them about where nigger troublemakers might meet, and we'd go there and then file a report."

"Some Vietnam Special Forces veterans—particularly those who had worked in murky clandestine operations with the CIA, the Special Operations Group (SOG) or the top secret Detachment B-57—were 'dumped' into the 20th for 'safe-keeping,' according to a former major with Army counterintelligence," the *Commercial Appeal* wrote. "They couldn't let a lot of these crazy guys back into the States because they couldn't forget their training," he said. "Birmingham became Saigon. The rural South was in-country and at times things got out of hand" (see sidebar).

Douglas Valentine pointed out in *The Phoenix Program* (New York: Avon Books, 1992) that there are allegations that the Army's "11th Military Intelligence Group (MIG) in Memphis kept Martin Luther King, Jr. under 24-hour-a-day surveillance and reportedly watched and took photos while King's assassin moved into position, took aim, fired and walked away" (p. 338).

Why would Army Intelligence turn SOG and other Special Forces assassins loose on King and other black leaders, whom it had designated national security threats? Were the Special Forces "dumped" into the South for "safe-keeping"? Or were they redeployed in the South to terrorize African Americans into submission? What does Army Intelligence know about the King assassination?

The mainstream national media could play a crucial role in turning up the heat on the Army. It's time for the media to put the issue of the Army's spying on African-American leaders on Washington's political agenda. The public deserves to know the truth.

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